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JERRY BITZ OF ILWU LOCAL 8, LOCAL 40, PCPA

INTERVIEWEE: JERRY BITZ

INTERVIEWERS: HARVEY SCHWARTZ

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[00:00:00] **HARVEY SCHWARTZ:** Jerry, can you give us your name, the date of your birth, where you were born and what local you were in?

[00:00:19] **JERRY BITZ:** Sure. My name is Jerry Bitz and I was born in Portland Oregon, June 26, 1941. I joined the waterfront as a casual in August of 1959. And I then became a Class B person in 1964 and became a registered A longshoreman in 1968.

[00:00:53] **HARVEY:** Great, can we roll you back a little bit?

[00:00:55] **JERRY:** Sure.

[00:00:56] **HARVEY:** Tell me a little bit about growing up in Portland.

[00:01:06] **JERRY:** Actually, I didn't grow up in Portland, I lived in the suburbs. We actually lived in Shorewood, Oregon, which is 18 miles south of Portland. So we commuted to Portland every day. And when you're a casual you commute every day and then you commute back home to the evening if you didn't get a job.

[00:01:25] **HARVEY:** Were your parents involved in the union as well?

[00:01:27] **JERRY:** Yes, my father was a longshoreman. He worked nights—Gang 25 on the night side. And so we got to endure the 1948 strike. And then we were actually we're in one of the medical magazines, our whole family, there's six kids. We were one of the first families, we were featured in the magazine with our dental health care with our dentist, way back. I think I was probably 11 or 12 when that picture was taken, something like, I'm not exactly what date.

[00:02:06] **HARVEY:** You said you were involved in the '48 strike. What do you remember from the '48 strike?

[00:02:11] **JERRY:** That we were, you know, we knew our dad had a good job and made good money but during the '48 strike there were very little benefits, you just struggled along and you showed up at the picket lines and did what you needed to do. And I know that our church brought us food baskets and I went and hid in my room when they came. But then I'm kind of proud of it now because it's so amazing that how beautiful the waterfront has treated our families through the histories.

[00:02:48] **HARVEY:** How come you hid in your room?

[00:02:53] **JERRY:** We weren't—we're not used to accepting charity. You always worked for what you got and they brought this huge basket and it just kind of humbled you that other people still think about you and help you.

[00:03:06] **HARVEY:** You go to high school around here?

[00:03:10] **JERRY:** I went to Tigard High School, graduated in 1960. Yes.

[00:03:15] **HARVEY:** Did you go into the military after that?

[00:03:17] **JERRY:** No, I did not. I started in 1959 and I signed up for the draft and got married in 1963. And I guess as being married, I guess that made me not eligible, I'm not sure why. But I was signed up for everything for it but I did not serve in the military.

[00:03:47] **HARVEY:** And how did you decide to get work down on the waterfront?

[00:03:52] **JERRY:** Well, my dad took me down there and I was dressed up pretty nice. It was August of 1959 and we went to the hall and they needed people and I got a job that day and I was dressed up nice and I said, "Dad, I can't work in these good clothes." We were making like \$2.00 an hour or something. He said, "That's alright. You can buy anything you need when you're done working." And so, my first day I was dressed a little

better than most on the waterfront.

[00:04:23] **HARVEY:** Do you remember the first day? Can you tell us about it?

[00:04:26] **JERRY:** Yes, I can. I worked in a guy's gang, a guy named 'Teacher,' and he was kind of a cantankerous old guy. We were rolling 55-gallon barrels up in the wings and the sun was beating down on the deck and it felt like it was 150 degrees but I was happy. I thought I went to heaven. It was amazing. As bad as the job was, it was beautiful.

[00:04:56] **HARVEY:** Why do you say that?

[00:05:00] **JERRY:** Well, I've grown to appreciate it more because of my involvement in the union over the years and you know, we—the comradery between the men and the different things that we—we'd work hard all day, we argue all day, and then we go fishing and do everything together. It was just an amazing family that we got to join as a part of the ILWU [International Longshoremen and Warehouse Union] .

[00:05:27] **HARVEY:** Do you know sometimes there have been arguments that people will give you a hard time the first day, not show you things, did you have anything like that?

[00:05:36] **JERRY:** No. You know there were different old timers that—I think it was tough love. They wanted you to learn it right because on a waterfront it was very dangerous and if you didn't do it right, you might not be here, so. I was treated very well through the whole—my 42 years on the waterfront. I just feel blessed to be a part of it actually.

[00:06:03] **HARVEY:** What product did you work that was the most difficult, the most unpleasant?

[00:06:13] **JERRY:** Well, hides is always a nasty one because you had stack them a certain way. And you had to put dunnage in between. And you had to cross-tie everything. And then if you worked hides more than one or two days they weren't too friendly with you when you went to lunch because the restaurant people sure didn't want you in there. And then you'd come back from lunch and those hides were so slimy that all the work you'd done, the dunnage would slip and you had to restack everything that you had done prior to lunch—well not everything but a portion of it. But that's probably one of the most obnoxious or annoying jobs. I mean there's so many beautiful jobs on the waterfront because the good thing about it was you had another choice. So there's nothing really bad on the waterfront.

[00:07:13] **HARVEY:** What was the best one?

[00:07:16] **JERRY:** The best one? Aw, gee. The best job? There's a lot of beautiful functions that we're involved in like tipping over the lumber in Vancouver. But it's hard to say what was the best job because there's so many different—you get to drive the brand new cars on the autoships, you get to drive the cranes loading containers, I mean how many people get to experience that same thing? The variety is so much, it's so huge that the average guy doesn't get to experience anything near what longshoreman does.

[00:08:00] **HARVEY:** When you say you got to work lumber, how did you do that?

[00:08:04] **JERRY:** Well when we first started we hand-stowed the lumber piece by piece. And then eventually

they started banning it up and then you had those old hard-tired lift machines. And it was pretty difficult. And then later on in the years we started stuffing containers at container freight stations and then they were loaded aboard the vessel in the containers. So it evolved by mechanization, you know, over the years so each job got just a little bit better by mechanization.

[00:08:44] **HARVEY:** You mentioned driving cranes. Were you a crane driver?

[00:08:48] **JERRY:** I was—let's see. Actually I was a crane trainer. I never did take a crane plug but I always—if they needed somebody I would drive cranes on scrap at Schnitzer [Schnitzer Steel Industries] . I've driven cranes on containers. I've driven cranes loading logs out of the water. I've driven the bulk cranes where they clam oar out of the vessel. So, like I've said, I've been very lucky to try a little bit of everything.

[00:09:29] **HARVEY:** How did you learn how to drive cranes?

[00:09:31] **JERRY:** Well, you just got up there behind those old timers and some of them, if they thought you were halfway competent, then you got stuck and you were there. But there were some amazing guys that were very good about training. And then eventually they had crane training and stuff later on in the years. But a lot of it was, you know, the old steam winches and stuff, and you took those on cold days because it was so doggone cold out there on deck it was kind of nice to sit in that steam bath.

[00:10:04] **HARVEY:** You were a winch driver too?

[00:10:08] **JERRY:** Well, you just did whatever they asked you to do. I was not an "official" winch driver but when you run out of the guys you step up to the plate and take over.

[00:10:21] **HARVEY:** Do you remember the first time you did that?

[00:10:25] **JERRY:** I remember the old steam winches and you had a hatch tender and two drivers just for one gear. So it was pretty amazing and you wanted to make sure you were in coordination with your partner. But, there's so many things the longshore people do and did that it just—when you're young you just want to try everything and that's the way I felt. I wanted to learn as much as I could. So yes.

[00:11:00] **HARVEY:** Wow. Did you get active in the union politics at all?

[00:11:04] **JERRY:** Yes, I did.

[00:11:05] **HARVEY:** Can you tell us about that?

[00:11:07] **JERRY:** I started in 1978 as a caucus delegate. I went to San Diego and it was adventure. I couldn't believe—we were across the court from the Hawaiians Hospitality Room and it went 24/7 and I didn't realize until later until I was active in a convention in Portland how they operate and how they take care of their own and—but, it just fascinated me the way that they hosted for their own members and took care of everybody.

[00:11:52] **HARVEY:** What other offices did you end up running for?

[00:11:55] **JERRY:** Let's see, I was President of Labor Relations. B.A. [business agent] occasionally, that was

for Local 8. I was a longshoreman for 33 years at Local 8 and then nine or ten years I was at Local 40 as a clerk and a super cargo.

[00:12:18] **HARVEY:** You said you were president. You were president of. . . ?

[00:12:21] **JERRY:** Of Local 8 and Local 40.

[00:12:23] **HARVEY:** You were president of both Local 8 and Local 40?

[00:12:25] **JERRY:** At different times, naturally. [laughs]

[00:12:29] **HARVEY:** What you remember about being president about Local 8? And why did you run for office to begin with?

[00:12:38] **JERRY:** Well, actually the first time I ran for office I ran for earnings clerk because I wanted to know the people because those are the ones who register everybody's jobs and where they went and everything. And I wanted to learn and back when I started it was 1,500 registered longshoreman in Portland and then about 400 B men, I think, something like that. But I didn't know I was running against God, and I ran and that was my agony of defeat, I got beat badly.

[00:13:12] **HARVEY:** Who were you running against?

[00:13:13] **JERRY:** [? Shadow Duland?] He was a unique guy. I don't even know why I even ran against him, I just wanted to learn. But then I think later on I made—I think I first started out as LRC [Labor Relations Committee] for a while and then I ran for president and stuff like that.

[00:13:33] **HARVEY:** What do you remember from your presidency in Local 8?

[00:13:39] **JERRY:** Oh, man. What did I learn?

[00:13:42] **HARVEY:** Issues? Major beefs?

[00:13:44] **JERRY:** Oh yes, you know, there was a lot of beefs.

[00:13:49] **HARVEY:** Arbitrations? Whatever.

[00:13:50] **JERRY:** Yeah, we had arbitrations. We had a unique one. We had the—Chinese cargo came into Portland and a foreman was upset at one of our longshoremen and he threw a two by four, and he didn't mean to hit him but he hit him. So we went to arbitration and the arbitrator ruled in our favor that the area around him was hazardous to the longshoreman. And they couldn't believe they lost. But it was one of the most memorable arbitrations that I ever was involved in.

[00:14:32] **HARVEY:** That's interesting. You remember the '71 lock out—excuse me, '71 strike? **JERRY:** Yes, sir.

What did you do during that time? Were you in office at that time?

[00:14:45] **JERRY:** No, I didn't. But Harry [Bridges] told us from the very beginning that it doesn't look good and if you guys want what you want then you're going to be on strike. And so I listened to him very diligently and I put money away and it's a good thing it didn't go much longer than it did because I think I was on my last account when they finally settled the strike. I helped in the—we had a food kitchen or a food pantry on the bottom of the hall on 17th and Gleeson, that's where the old hall was, and it was fun. We went out and got food and stuff and gave it to everybody and I got to be a part of that. But I wasn't active as a union officer at that time.

[00:15:40] **HARVEY:** Did you do picket duty?

[00:15:42] **JERRY:** Oh sure, I was proud to do it. That's fine.

[00:15:47] **HARVEY:** Do you remember any details from it?

[00:15:49] **JERRY:** I don't, not very much. I know it was long. It was a long 121 days or something to that effect. **HARVEY:** Was that the Taft-Hartley injunction?

Correct.

[00:16:02] **HARVEY:** Okay. When again did you go over to Local 40?

[00:16:12] **JERRY:** In 2000's, I think. No, it was before that, 1998, I think.

[00:16:18] **HARVEY:** How come you decided to do that?

[00:16:22] **JERRY:** It took me that long to figure out it was a lot easier to write down '40 ton' than to move it by hand and so I thought that's—and I was very good friend with Larry Clark and have a lot of admiration for. He was a good guy. And he kind of asked me to transfer, which was a good move I think. I got to learn another aspect of the waterfront and so it was very good.

[00:16:49] **HARVEY:** And you ran for office in Local 40?

[00:16:51] **JERRY:** Yes. I was on LRC and I was president and dispatcher for quite a while—until I retired actually, I was dispatching.

[00:17:02] **HARVEY:** You were?

[00:17:02] **JERRY:** Yes.

[00:17:03] **HARVEY:** When you ran for president what do you remember being president in Local 40, what major issues do you remember?

[00:17:12] **JERRY:** Well, Larry [Clark] was the Godfather. He was the business agent. You just follow his lead and he was—I remember when we were doing—I was on LRC during the 1980 registration of Local 8 and we had over 4,000 applications and so the LRC at Local 8 was up at PMA's [Pacific Maritime Association] office for days and months going through all the applications. And then I heard the LRC people there say, "We got an arbitration today." And you could hear the different people in PMA's office say, "Who's it with?" And they'd

say, “Larry Clark” and you could hear the doors closing because nobody wanted to take him on because he was so well prepared. So anything that happened when I was president I have to credit, most of it to Larry Clark. We had our differences, but. . . .

[00:18:14] **HARVEY:** Do you remember any particular arbitration proceeding?

[00:18:18] **JERRY:** No, I don’t really, no. I was only there about eight or nine years. But I was only president for only maybe two or three years, if that, or something like that.

[00:18:31] **HARVEY:** And when did you retire again?

[00:18:33] **JERRY:** Two thousand five? I think. ‘05 or ‘06. It’s probably 2006. April 2006.

[00:18:44] **HARVEY:** Okay. What made you decide to get involved in a serious way with the Pacific Coast Pensioners Association?

[00:18:57] **JERRY:** I kind of stayed away for a while because I had been in politics for so long. And I started looking and very few people, when you look at who’s retired, very few people show up in the Pensioners and those are the ones that got me what I’ve got. And I thought I should come back and give back some and help. And so we do the mail out, my wife and I, with a number of other couples at Local 8. Once a month, it’s not a big deal. And

so, yeah.

[00:19:40] **HARVEY:** Have you ran for offices in the Pacific Coast Pensioners Association?

[00:19:44] **JERRY:** No. I have not. I’ve helped on different things but I just—I’m a gopher.

[00:19:55] **HARVEY:** You know there was a time when Black workers had a difficult time in Local 8. Do you remember very much about that and do you have much of a take on that?

[00:20:06] **JERRY:** Well that was the group that I was with. That’s the first time Blacks were. . . entered onto the waterfront in Portland. And, I know there were some skirmishes or disagreements. But I never had—matter of fact, a lot of my good friends are Black. The color doesn’t mean anything to me. If he’s a good worker and knows what he’s

doing that’s all I care about. I don’t care what color they are. And some of the guys that I bumped heads with are good friends and invite me to functions. I’ve even been to a lot of their barbeques. Lynell Hill, he and I argued at meetings when I was president, I mean we bumped heads. But you know, that’s the way the whole waterfront is. You can argue and raise hell with each other but if somebody else comes in and does it then that’s a different story because we all band together. So that’s my experience. I’ve never had any problem. I have some really good friends. Color isn’t an issue. It has nothing to do with it. It’s just. . .

[00:21:28] **HARVEY:** Any incidence you ever saw that were uncomfortable that made you unhappy regarding relationship between Black and white workers?

[00:21:36] **JERRY:** Well, you're disappointed because some people are so headstrong about an issue and I don't know if it's their environment or whatever but I just feel like if the guy does his share doesn't matter who is he or what he is, you just work with them. There's a very small amount of people—and it's not just whoever. We have a lot of guys that are different nationalities and stuff that maybe don't carry the load. You just get on those just like everybody else. 'Make the hook move, keep the hook moving.' That's been our motto on the waterfront.

[00:22:18] **HARVEY:** What have you missed? Have we missed anything important?

[00:22:20] **JERRY:** My biggest thrill on the waterfront was when that nonunion barge in Vancouver, Washington tried to load themselves and I think that brought the whole Columbia River area together that you don't mess with any local, we all stick together. And the first—I was fortunate enough to be a part of that with Larry Clark. I was from Local 8 then and Larry Clark and Gary Duback from Local 4—I mean there were a lot of other players—and Jimmy Herman and Rudy Rubio and those guys all came. And we had meeting probably four or five nights prior to the mass picket, going over scenarios on what would be the safest for the people and what would be the most productive.

And Plan A, which I didn't like, but we had a camouflage boat hid up by the slip by the Columbia crane and we were going to go in and wire all the throttles on the lift machines and start it up and let them do the damage for us. But, the security were kind of rent-a-cops and things like that, and they had guns. And I had kids in school. So that's why one of the main reasons why I didn't like Plan A.

The International [ILWU], they researched the legal avenues and they said you know the safest thing is to have a mass picket. If we get put to court, we may pay a fine maybe we'll get away with it. And that's when Bob, Big Bob [McEllrath], that's the hardest I've ever seen Big Bob work because he cut more bands than I'd ever saw. As a result of it that barge line owner called Larry, or Jimmy Herman, that day and worked out something and we loaded that barge the rest of the way. And even God was on our side because that barge didn't even make it to Hawaii, it sunk. So that's probably the first time God was on the longshore side but we won one. So that's the good news.

[00:25:02] **HARVEY:** What year was that approximately?

[00:25:04] **JERRY:** Aw man. I'm horrible with dates. It's long before Big Bob went to the International—no, it was when Jimmy Herman was president.

[00:25:16] **HARVEY:** That puts it between '77 and '91.

[00:25:19] **JERRY:** Yeah, I'd have to do some research to find out exactly when it was but that was probably the proudest moment I'd ever have. Because we organized the guys and made them eight or ten wide and there were over 1,000—there were 1,500 longshoreman but we had—the Vancouver [Washington] longshoreman were smart enough to go to the police and explain to them their plight, you know their problem, and make sure they understood that we're working for not just us but other labor people. So they only sent two cars. I happened to be standing beside the one guy and he gets on the radio and he says, "They're going in. They're going in!" And the dispatcher says, "Surround them!" And there's only two of them, "Surround them!" It was possible. They knew what was going on and I think they cooperated very well with us.

[00:26:23] **HARVEY:** Wow.

[00:26:23] **JERRY:** It was an amazing day.

[00:26:25] **HARVEY:** That's a great story. Any other things like that?

[00:26:33] **JERRY:** I don't know, gosh there's so many. I remember—I was fortunate enough, I'm a country bumpkin and being part of the ILWU I've been an overseas delegate, I got to go to China. When I was active in Local 8 the Port of Portland would take a Local 8 person, so I've been to Taiwan, I've been Japan. We went over and made a presentation to our sister city of Portland which is Chiba [China] and we were in a parade waving at people that never saw us before in their lives, that was pretty uncomfortable. [laughs] There's been so many highlights. It's hard to narrow them down.

I mean there's so many things that if I had not been exposed or been part of the ILWU I'd never had got to see all these things. One of the things that really impressed me with going to China, going to Japan, or going anywhere—every time we went someplace they remembered every time that we didn't load a ship on their behalf or—I mean, Taiwan, Japan, China, anywhere we went we were always told about the support that we've gotten from the ILWU all over the world. I mean the small places that I've been. I know the other guys have said the same thing but that was one of the things that most impressed me that they don't forget what we've done for them and so we can't forget what they do for us.

I remember when I was president of Local 8. We were having some issues with somebody and I went over to Larry Clark and we called Tas Bull [Tasnor Ivan Bull] in Australia. And I think it was some trucking or container issue, I don't remember what it was but it was resolved the next day. One phone call to Australia. So our connection is international, but our love is international. We stick together and we try to support each other as much as we can.

[00:28:48] **HARVEY:** That's great. Kind of a wrap up question, looking back, what did it all mean to you? I think you've kind of said it already but would you like to give us a summary? Like a summary of. . .?

[00:29:03] **JERRY:** A summary? I feel blessed to be a part of the ILWU. I mean my family has lived well. My family has got benefits. A lot of people can't help their children. The longshoreman lived the lifestyle well enough that they can give support to their kids and help them either get on the waterfront or get them out of financial trouble, and I feel like there's very few people in a working class that can help their kids as much as we're able to because of what all of the people prior to us have accomplished and gotten for us. So, I'm humbled by the amount of—the way that everybody sticks together and helps anybody that's down and out and that seems to be the theme of the ILWU is when somebody's down seems like there's a longshoreman picking them up.

[00:30:11] **HARVEY:** Thank you very much. That's very nice.

[00:30:14] **JERRY:** [laughs] You guys got me on the spot because I'm not a speaker and I don't like these things. I just send somebody else that's a better speaker to do things.

[00:30:26] **HARVEY:** You did a great job because it came from the heart.

[00:30:32] **JERRY:** My sister was at a Longshore picnic and she was at the end of a finish line and a guy ran,

not intentionally, and hit her so she got a broken leg, I had rheumatic fever and my little sister was born without a hip socket so we were in Kaiser in Vancouver because there was no hospitals in Portland. So we had three family members in one hospital room in one time. How many people have that kind of coverage? I mean there's no way my dad could afford what our family had put him through. So you know, you can't be anyway but humble about how the waterfront has treated us. For sure.

[00:31:23] **HARVEY:** That's great.